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Postcolonialism

Postcolonial literature documents the difficult attempt to recover a national or ethnic identity that has been heavily influenced—even eclipsed—by a foreign presence. During the twentieth century, many colonies of European nations gained or recovered their national independence. However, the extended presence of a foreign and dominant culture posed significant problems of identity for the authors of these nations. Though they could resent and criticize the incursion of foreign powers, their cultures had been indelibly marked by colonization, and they were left to analyze the ways in which they had been exploited or oppressed by their occupiers. The writings of Postcolonial authors document this struggle, intermittently tracing threads of a lost identity and calling into question the methods and motives of the colonizers.



Mahatma Gandhi

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In terms of influence, Postcolonial literature can perhaps best be understood as a response to colonial literature. Authors such as [Rudyard Kipling](#) (1865–1936) and [Joseph Conrad](#) (1857–1924), who are often included in the category of Postcolonial literature, have also been identified by contemporary critics as perpetrators of imperial presence, because their works depict colonized regions in the language and cultural context of the colonizers. In so doing, these works not only influenced the perception of native people and their cultures by white European readers, but they also shaped the way in which the regions perceived themselves. Literary and cultural theorists such as [Edward Said](#) (1935–2003) and [Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak](#) (1942–) have been instrumental in drawing attention to the subtle methods of oppression and marginalization in such colonial texts. Said's influential book *Orientalism* (1978) was especially important in defining the ways in which Western scholarship and literature helped sustain imperial hegemony over the Middle East specifically, and the colonized world generally, by reproducing prejudices and stereotypes that skewed the reality of the colonized people and their cultures.

Though in some cases the relationship between an imperialist nation and its colonized region is a central theme of the artist's work, as in the novels of [Salman Rushdie](#) (1947–) and the poetry of Meena Alexander (1951–), often it presents itself as a background or the cultural context in which other stories are told and other issues or themes exposed. Frederick Philip Grove's (1879–1948) novels address the conflict between individuals and their social obligations, but do so in the setting of postcolonial Canada. [Leonard Cohen](#)'s (1934–) verse and fiction explore his preferred themes of sensuality and spirituality in the same context. Shashi Deshpande (1938–) traces the relationship between British and Indian cultures en route to her primary exploration of women's issues and gender conflict. [Joseph Furphy](#) (1843–1912), in his novel *Such is Life*, describes life in rural Australia. No matter how diverse these authors' topical interests may be, the colonial issue is always present, and critics often read their discussions of gender, class, politics, and self-identity within the dichotomy imposed by a foreign, colonizing presence. Thus, though the Postcolonial project is concerned with the liberation and self-expression of the oppressed groups, it also recognizes the inescapability of that colonial influence.

Though Postcolonial authors come from a wide variety of national backgrounds, Africa and India are arguably the two regions most significant to the movement. [Chinua Achebe](#)'s (1930–) landmark contribution *Things Fall Apart* (1958) portrays the gradual colonization of a Nigerian village from the perspective of Okonkwo, one of its most respected citizens. By relating Okonkwo's misfortune, Achebe contrasts the peaceful façade of this colonization with its traumatic cultural consequences. In [Bharati Mukherjee](#)'s (1940–) novel *Jasmine* (1989), the protagonist relates the story of her difficult life, first in India, and then in the United States. The work focuses on the clash of cultures, treating first the conflict of ethnic and social groups in India and then, on a larger scale, the divide between Eastern and Western civilizations. The theme of a dual identity based on estrangement from one's native traditions and the pursuit of a foreign cultural standard pervades *Jasmine*, as it does the work of many post-colonial writers.

In addition to those listed above, some of the regions most closely associated with Postcolonialism are Latin America, South Asia, New Zealand, and Ireland.

Consult the resources provided to help with your study of Postcolonialism and the historical forces that shaped the literature and cultures of these nations. Note, specifically, the reference essays, images, and general articles that provide interesting insights into Postcolonial literature, and the key social or political events that occurred during colonial rule or the postcolonial era. For more detailed discussions of key literary works, check out the many critical essays below. And don't forget to consult the websites for more information on the topic and its key figures.

[Image Gallery](#)

[Postcolonial Writers](#)

Links to Author Pages

[About Postcolonialism](#)

Definitions and essays about Postcolonialism and its historical context

[Criticism about Postcolonialism](#)

Critical essays about Postcolonial writers and their works

[KnowledgeNotes™ and Work Overviews](#)

Study guides for select works of Postcolonial literature and its historical context; work overviews from The Encyclopedia of the Novel

[National Public Radio Interview Transcripts](#)

Scholars, writers and others discuss Postcolonialism.

[Poets on Screen](#)

Listen to Postcolonial poets reading their own works.

[Historical Video Clips](#)

[Audio Clips](#)

Listen to clips of poems and excerpts of works of Postcolonial writers.

[Websites](#)

Select Study Questions

- Consult the resources provided, then develop your own definition of "postcolonialism." In writing your definition, answer these questions: How did the experience of European colonization affect the indigenous people who were being colonized? How did the indigenous people affect the colonizers? How did colonial language and education influence the culture and sense of identity of the colonized people?
- Write a brief essay that describes the concept of "otherness" in postcolonial theory and literature. Where useful, you should quote from some of the resources provided to help with your description of the concept. A good source for information on the topic would be the many websites on postcolonial theory and literature.
- Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* is regarded as one of the most significant works of postcolonial African literature. After reading the novel and reviewing some of the resources provided, write a brief essay that discusses the role of weather in the narrative. Does weather play a symbolic role in the novel? What is the significance of rain or drought? Demonstrate the ways in which the weather offers insights into both the spiritual realm and the physical world depicted in the novel.
- Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe regarded Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as an "offensive and deplorable book" because of its imperialist view of Africa and Africans. According to Achebe, Conrad failed to provide an outside frame of reference—a point of view other than that of the white European—to enable the book to be read as either ironic or critical of European imperialism. Do you agree or disagree with Achebe's assessment? Argue for or against his perspective, making sure you cite examples from the novel to support your point of view.
- Discuss the role of Christianity in Alan Paton's novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Despite the fact that the religion is embraced by most of the natives in the story, it fails to improve their moral and social tribal system. Why is this so?